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VARIATIONS ON A THEME

GRACE HAZARD CONKLING



THE BLINDMAN PRIZE POEM

1922.

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CHARLESTON, SO. CAR.

JUL 13 1922

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PUBLISHED BY THE POETRY SOCIETY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

THE CAROLINA PRESS

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

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THE BLINDMAN PRIZE POEM
1922
THE FIRST POEM TO RECEIVE THE AWARD



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P R E F A C E.

THIS BLINDMAN PRIZE poem has been published in a limited edition by the Poetry Society of South Carolina for distribution to poets, members of the Society, and others actively interested in the art of poetry.

THE OBJECT OF THE PRIZE is to stimulate the writing of sustained poems of considerable length, and to provide some adequate recompense to the creative artist for the time and labor involved.

"VARIATIONS ON A THEME" was chosen for the prize by Miss Amy Lowell who acted as sole judge in the 1921-22 contest, which was international in its scope, several hundred poems having been submitted from all over the United States, England, and the English Dominions.

THE BLINDMAN PRIZE of \$250 is offered annually through the Poetry Society of South Carolina by W. Van R. Whitall, Esq., in commemoration of Hervey Allen's war poem the "Blindman" first published in the North American Review for December 1919.

HONORABLE MENTION POEMS
Blindman Prize Contest 1922

<i>From the Journal of Crispin</i>	Wallace Stevens
<i>Avatar</i>	Babette Deutsch
<i>The Elders Come to Her</i>	Hildegarde Flanner
<i>The Indians in the Woods</i>	Janet Loxely Lewis
<i>The Garden</i>	Harold Monro
<i>Behold America</i>	Robert J. Roe
<i>The Voice of an Unknown Soldier</i>	James W. Dean
<i>Oranges</i>	Louise Morey Bowman
<i>Mutations on the Phoenix</i>	Herbert Read
<i>The Stone Guest</i>	N. S. Busanell
<i>The Pirates</i>	Beatrice Ravenel

PART ONE

Fresh Pomegranates
and
Green Linden-blooms
Mode

Title—a phrase from Wagner's "Meistersinger"

PRELUDE

*April hung a sky of soft indigo
Above my head
And suddenly while I counted stars . . .
Lost them again . . .
I had thoughts of you
That stopped my thinking
As though you had showered me
With warm dark roses*

VARIATIONS

I.

So you would have me come to life,
Breathe, burn, feel,
I who had learned listlessness,
Myself lost, rocks more aware,
Bitter rocks
Sun-repelling . . .

I ask what it is you see in my look . . .
Your own splendor?
Fire of your spirit, fire
Alert, exquisite, full of demand?
You, like amber, you who know
Bright darkness of amber,
Do you see yourself in my eyes . . .
Do you stand there
Golden?

When you turn
Does your glance find me?
Now at last is there life . . .
Is there warmth
Hidden?
Presence . . . rush of petals . . . breath
Answering breath?
Do you kindle me to faint flame, oh relentless
Spendthrift of fire?

II.

All day the hillside flickered with white birches . . .
Now they have gone away.
I saw them hurrying on shy feet
Into the silver blur
Of evening.

Now darkness opens
Like a flower.
Over the trees, over the breathless trees
The hyacinth-blue of the air
Dims to purple.
I have seen such shadow

In the hollow of a wave,
But here is mystery
Of woven leaves.

Hold me,
Hold me closer
For the sake of this vanishing beauty
You have locked into my heart!

III.

Tender, heavy with tenderness
This midnight . . .
Soft to the cheek . . .
Warm satin softness . . .
Deep-breasted slow-breathing languor of lotus dark . . .
Petals of fire-opal hid for an hour as though they were not
in bloom . . .

IV.

Where were we?
Lilac-leaves or leaves of young bamboo . . .
It makes no difference in the dream I had
When I saw the moon caught in a feathery spray,
Caught in a cowweb of her own light
Among new-fledged trees.
You disentangled the moon . . . laid it on my open palms . . .
You said,
"Now you need not cry for it any more."
I was careful of the moon
As though it had been a moth or an orchid . . .
I dared not breathe
For fear its light would die . . .
Dazzled,
I closed my eyes.
When I opened them,
You had picked up the moon
And gone away.

V.

It was along a river with an Indian name
Past a crocus-colored mountain
Under tumbled clouds
That we ran . . .
The light glinted from marsh-grass . . . willow-twigs . . .
We saw pale water through lattice-work of willows . . .
This was a day you forgot to love me

Because you had so many things to think about,
And all the way through the Chopin Sonata
You never suspected you were out-of-doors with me and away
Running in the Spring wind . . .

VI.

Is there anything more for us than opening eyes to a rose-
flush of cloud . . . opening eyes to a bouquet of pigeon-
backs scattering down out of the wind . . . blue and
gray-violet . . . buff and mother-of-pearl . . .

You with your head bowed on my shoulder . . . silent a long
time . . . is there anything more?

Is this all . . . morning like a bronze shell for the wind to
blow through . . . morning tilted on an edge of purple
horizon-rim . . . an hour of rose-flush . . . an hour of
bronze-hazel . . . noon by and by . . . and you with your
head on my shoulder wanting me with a thousand years
of wanting?

Why don't you tell me what you are thinking with your head
on my shoulder? Is there no meaning in ache of empty
beautiful air . . . biting gold of sun . . . none in un-
answered moon or sea-mist stars? Is it in vain the hills
are wanting something with a thousand years of wanting?

You . . . silent a long time . . . can you see anything more
for us anywhere . . . or is this all?

VII.

I have seen you quiet
As an evening sky . . .
Or driven like a flake of pear-blossom
On the stream of the wind . . .
I have seen your pallor
And shadowiness . . .
I have touched you
And known denial . . .

VIII.

The three mountains in the sky
Rest upon the pointed cedars of our mountain.
They are steep in heaven,
Sheer as the cliffs below us.
. . . Impossible to say what color
Flowers on those rocks!

It might be an April country
Of almond trees.

I could more easily let you go
Under a harsher sunset,
April floats into my eyes
Out of coral valleys . . .
Leave me . . . leave me now
Lest the granite ways remind your feet
Of darkness . . .

Dusk is a gauze of ruby shadows.
Leave me . . .
I shall be thinking of this moment
Afterward . . .
Your kiss . . . a drift of almond petals across my lips . . .
Almond flowers falling at Spring's end . . .

PART TWO.

End of the World
Mode



PRELUDE

*This web of dusk and sunset
Has caught thistledown hills
And a moth of mist . . .
Shall we disentangle them,
Let them blow away?
Or shall we keep them to make real our dream
After the Puritan moon
Has parted us?*

VARIATIONS

I.

Don't let yesterday go,
The tawny pheasant-wing of it stretched over the west,
Don't tell me the stairway of those hills
Led nowhere?
When we looked back from the dark to the lighted street
Because of election drums and scrawled red fire
Don't say it did not matter
Our cheeks touched . . . and our lips!

Yesterday poured itself away in stars . . .
Down they spilled and dripped like silver water . . .
If it was the same music to your heart it was to mine
Don't let yesterday go!

II.

You say you understand . . .
Talk as if you did!
Open the door of my mind
And come in!

Will you always be needing Tennyson
To show you shaking light?
Will you never unlearn melancholy,
See November laughing?

Laughing at you for a little boy lost,
Rolling you gold pumpkins down the cornfields,
Blindfolding you with meadow-mist
Because you will not look at them!

Is color nothing?
Is it nothing to see a hill like a passion-flower?
Can't you unravel the sky
And wrap me in the blue silk of it
Because I am cold with teaching you November
And you haven't love enough left
To warm me?

III.

Oh content with little
When I would give all!
You letting fall the ripe fruit of moments
I press into your hands . . .

Melting ineffable ivory of the flesh of fruit
Dripping honey and wonder . . .
Sharp high-flavored moments,
Pomegranate seeds tasting of strangeness.
Soft bewildered intervals deep-colored,
Fruit from the south
You do not know!

Days we have not chosen,
Days we shall never share . . .
Lost days fallen into the purple grasses
Of our autumn!

Oh incredibly perverse,
With lips locked against the pulp and dew
Of bountiful hours,
Will you never know the bloom and flavor
Of sun-warmed moments?
Will you never taste late-ripened moments
That have escaped frost?

Days we have not chosen,
Days we shall never share,
Lost days trodden into grasses
Under snow

IV.

Why did you go before the Chinese lily
Finished uncurling from its paper sheath?
I had named every flower of the seven
For a mood of yours:
Now you will not see yourself
In bloom.

Always I knew you would go,
But I had timed you by a winter lily.
Mood by mood unfolding . . .
"I shall learn them all at last," I said.

One with a gold heart is your remembering,
But your forgetting has a gold heart too.
One is the name you called me in the dark . . .
One, a clear silence cold as frost:
The delicate irony of your tenderness
Flowers on the same stem with your irresponsible cruelty . .

All these are star-pointed . . . definite . . .
But the seventh is yet in bud.

I am afraid to see it open
Lest it betray you.

V.

Now I remember that you searched my face
Lest any wrong might threaten you
From my heart . . .
And the fear in your swift look
Of one hurt by earth . . .
Thrust back
Out of heaven . . .

What was it you saw?
Dark
Against light
What sharp wonder?
I thought you would be the last
To leave me powerless.
There is gold air
Poured upon hills . . .
Shining air slow-flowing . . . full . . .
The wind in flood . . .

I have no joy of this
Because of you.
I know where trees in flower
Wait for me . . .
I am lost.
There is no beauty
Can find me.

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An official publication of the Society